DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 065 EC 307 529

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TITLE One School District's Efforts To Develop a Formal Inclusion Program at the Secondary Level.
PUB DATE 1999-05-00
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; *Inclusive Schools; Interviews; *Performance Factors; School Administration; Secondary Education; Success; *Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Collaboration; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated efforts to develop a formal inclusion program at the secondary level in a small urban school district. There were approximately 40 educators and 550 students in the junior and high school programs. About 60 of the students were identified with disabilities, including learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mental retardation. Analysis of observations and interviews with thirteen junior high and high school staff members uncovered four themes: (1) some educators are devoted to implementing inclusion while others are less engaged in the process; (2) inclusion occurs even when there is no formal program in place; (3) student behavior and the academic nature of the general education curriculum present some difficulties for students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms; and (4) it takes a combination of administrative support, scheduling adjustments, and teacher collaboration to make inclusion work. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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ED 436 065

Running Head: ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S EFFORTS

One School District's Efforts to Develop a Formal Inclusion Program at the Secondary Level

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated efforts to develop a formal inclusion program at the secondary level in a small urban school district. Analysis of observations and interviews with thirteen junior high and high school staff members uncovered four themes: 1) some educators are devoted to implementing inclusion while others are less engaged in the process, 2) inclusion occurs even when there is no formal program in place, 3) student behavior and the academic nature of the general education curriculum present some difficulties for students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms, and 4) it takes a combination of administrative support, scheduling adjustments, and teacher collaboration to make inclusion work.

One School District's Efforts to Develop a Formal Inclusion Program at the Secondary Level

Administrative support, support for staff and students, collaborative planning and working, and curricular adaptations contribute to the success of inclusion programs (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Educators often resist inclusion if they lack additional resources and support personnel, smaller classes, and preset evaluation procedures (Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell, 1994). Interdisciplinary planning, flexible scheduling, and collaborative teaching may facilitate the development of responsible inclusion programs (Malloy, 1997). Teachers may look forward to inclusion but fear being excluded from participating in programmatic decisions (Hamill & Dever, 1998). They are more likely to support an inclusion program if they have support from other school personnel and if they receive preparation through staff development (Werts, Wolery, Snyder, & Caldwell, 1996). Principals must actively support teachers as they participate in collaborative curriculum development (Fritz & Miller, 1995).

Inclusion involves different issues for secondary educators than it does for professionals at the elementary level. Teachers and administrators often feel the specificity of secondary level content than the child-centered approach found at the elementary level creates different demands which may impede inclusion efforts (Tralli, Colombo, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1996). For example, secondary teachers may emphasize social behavior over learning content for students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Olson, Chalmers, & Hoover, 1997). In addition, secondary education students with disabilities may need a curriculum that will prepare them for transition to adulthood (Smith & Puccini, 1995). However, general education secondary curricula could support that need by incorporating applied academics (Atkinson, Lunsford, & Hollingsworth, 1993).

This research looked at one small urban school district's efforts to develop a formal inclusion program. As the investigation began, the elementary schools already had successful inclusion programs and the junior high had just begun its own effort. The district was preparing to develop an inclusion program for the high school.

Method

This qualitative study explored the interactions of administrators and members of the faculty through observation, interview, and examination of school documents. The secondary education programs were located in one large building. There were approximately 40 educators and 550 students in the junior high and high school programs. About 60 of the students were identified with disabilities (learning disabilities, behavior disorders, or mental retardation).

Participants

Thirteen members of the junior high and high school staff participated in the study. The participants included eight members of the teaching staff (five in special educators and three in general education) and five supervisory personnel (three administrators and two supplemental services personnel). Participants volunteered and were assured anonymity.

Data Collection

Formal and informal observations in a variety of school locations took place at least once a month over a period of three semesters. Formal observations ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours in length and informal observations were usually brief, lasting only a few minutes. Each participant was interviewed one to four times using open-ended questioning. The

participants were asked to consider their present programs and possible changes planned for those programs. Initial interviews took about 45 minutes and subsequent interviews took 15 to 40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Participant remarks were analyzed and compared with fieldnotes from observations to identify issues of importance and then categorized into relevant themes (Krane, Andersen, & Strean, 1997). Themes were cross-referenced to establish their validity and to maintain consistency among experiences of the participants in the interpretation of the information. Consequently, a topic was considered important if a participant repeated the same information more than once or if two different participants discussed the same. Observed behavior was considered important if it was observed in at least three participants or if it was repeated at least three times by one individual.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed a picture of the attitudes and behavior of the staff as they considered inclusion at the secondary level. Four themes emerged, including: 1) some educators are devoted to implementing inclusion while others are less engaged in the process, 2) inclusion occurs even when there is no formal program in place, 3) student behavior and the academic nature of the general education curriculum present some difficulties for students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms, and 4) it takes a combination of administrative support, scheduling adjustments, and teacher collaboration to make inclusion work.

Some Educators are Devoted to Implementing Inclusion While Others are Less Engaged in the Process

Some educators in the district were committed to implementing inclusion at the secondary level while others were less interested in making changes. The district school psychologist was a strong proponent of inclusion who had spearheaded inclusion in the elementary and junior high programs. She also wanted to see inclusion integrated into the high school program but expressed concern about having sufficient resources and faculty interest at that level. During the data collection, that psychologist left the district and was replaced by a person who did not seem to share her enthusiasm for inclusion. The new school psychologist spent most of her time in the elementary schools and seemed uninvolved with the secondary programs or inclusion at that level. The administrators also expressed concerns about implementing inclusion in the secondary education programs. They indicated there were increased instructional difficulties, parent concerns, and less teacher interest than in the elementary schools. However, one administrator did note there were fewer complaints about having inclusion in the junior high after the program had been implemented for a year.

Inclusion Occurs Even When There is No Formal Program in Place

Inclusion occurred at all school levels in the district. The participants even acknowledged inclusive activities in the high school although they reported they did not have an inclusion program at that level. They also indicated there were fewer behavior problems and the students seemed more motivated after the first year of formal inclusion in the junior high.

The teachers felt the administration would implement an inclusion program in the high school that differed from their experiences and beliefs about creating a workable structure. Like

the teachers in the Werts study (1996), these teachers feared sufficient resources would not be allocated, such as teacher training or classroom supports. The support staff also felt few adaptations would be made to support inclusion students in general education classrooms.

Still, teachers or parents often initiated informal inclusive practices even though no formal structure existed. The participants noted instances of inclusion when a parent request resulted in the son or daughter being included in a general education class or an individual teacher chose to include a particular student in his or her classroom. They also mentioned a general education student helper regularly offered peer support in a special education classroom, which might be considered "reverse inclusion."

Student Behavior and the Academic Nature of the General Education Curriculum Present Some Difficulties for Students with Disabilities in Inclusion Classrooms

The participants believed student behavior and the academic nature of the general education curriculum limited the success of inclusion in the junior high and high school. Many of the participants felt the advanced academic content made inclusion difficult for students with disabilities because of their limited skills. They noted the general education teachers lowered their expectations because most of the special education students had a second or third grade reading level and there was insufficient support from the special education staff. The general education teachers were somewhat more open to including high functioning students with disabilities because they felt those students did not require much support to learn the general education curriculum. Some administration and special education participants agreed that the general education accommodations probably would have little success and agreed with the Smith and Puccini position (1995) that an applied curriculum would provide the greatest benefit. Many

of the participants also saw student behavior as an impediment to inclusion. They indicated when the students with disabilities were included difficulties often occurred. They believed classroom aides could help reduce student behavior problems and make inclusive practices more effective.

It Takes a Combination of Administrative Support, Scheduling Adjustments, and Teacher Collaboration to Make Inclusion Work

The participants believed that administrators and teachers must work together to create effective inclusion. This research, like the Fritz and Miller study (1995), found the teachers felt administrative support was a necessary component of a successful program. The teachers did not believe they had that support either in planning or in implementing a structure for inclusion. They also recognized time constraints kept teachers from implementing inclusive practices, training and administrative support in structuring inclusion were needed, and scheduling had to become more flexible to facilitate teacher collaboration.

Implications

Although implementing a formal inclusion program did not begin at the high school level as had been anticipated, a good deal of informal inclusion did occur. For example, all the students with disabilities did participated in "out classes" at least one period each day. Also, teachers frequently agreed to include a particular student when they could make the arrangements informally among themselves. The difficulties they noted included finding time to collaborate, limited availability of support staff, and the need for substantial instructional accommodations. In addition, the special education teachers reported difficulty making modifications for too many general education teachers' classrooms with little opportunity to actually work with those

teachers. Flexible scheduling to accommodate team-teaching and a sufficient level of support staff could lessen many of these concerns.

Student behavior presented another barrier to implementing successful inclusion. Difficult behaviors overwhelmed teachers, adding to the stress they already felt about making instructional accommodations. Again, support staff and co-teaching could reduce the degree to which those added responsibilities fell solely the classroom teacher. Also, the staff should broaden their instructional methods by instituting an applied approach to the curriculum to make direct connections between the academic content and the context where students would use the information. This approach would make the curriculum more accessible to an academically diverse group of students and also could reduce inappropriate classroom behavior as the students engaged in personally meaningful learning experiences.

Finally, the administration needs to show serious interest in creating a structure for implementing inclusion which teachers perceive as supporting their efforts and interests. Administrator enthusiasm would empower the teachers and give them confidence to eagerly address the challenges of inclusion. In addition, the administration could support flexible scheduling of students to reduce behavior problems and adjust teachers schedules to increase collaboration. They also need to provide sufficient resources for hiring support staff and for professional development on inclusion.

For effective inclusion policies to be implemented at the secondary level, teachers and administrators must become partners, actively working together to build an effective program. The best way to reach that goal might be to expand the informal inclusive activities that already exist in the school and mold those activities into a formal structure. There is some indication of

this in the investigation of the junior high, but it was not possible to determine how successful it could be in the high school because any attempt to institute an inclusion program at that level lost momentum when their inclusion zealot departed. Still, many of the high school's informal inclusive activities continue which can give other districts encouragement to pursue their own plans to create structures for the informal inclusion practices already in place in their schools.

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